

# THE WAGER OF THE MARQUIS DE MEROSAILLES. BY ANTHONY HOPE "The Prisoner of Zenda." "The Dolly Dialogues" Etc.

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In the year 1634, as spring came, there arrived at Strelsan a French nobleman of high rank and great possessions, and endowed with many accomplishments. He came to visit Prince Rudolf, whose acquaintance he had made while the prince was in Paris in the course of his travels. King Henry received M. de Merosailles—for such was his name—most graciously and sent a guard of honor to conduct him to the castle of Zenda where the prince was then staying in company with his sister Osa. There the marquis on his arrival was greeted with much joy by Prince Rudolf, who found his sojourn in the country somewhat irksome and was glad of the society of a friend with whom he could talk and sport and play at cards. All these things he did with M. de Merosailles, and his friend, ship arose between the young men, so that they spoke very freely to one another at all times, and most of all when they had drunk their wine and sat together in the evening in Prince Rudolf's chamber that looked across the most toward the gardens, for the new chateau that now stands on the site of these gardens was not then built. And one night M. de Merosailles made bold to ask the prince how it fell out that his sister the princess, a lady of such great beauty, seemed sad and showed no pleasure in the society of any gentleman, but treated all alike with coldness and disdain. Prince Rudolf, laughing, answered that girls were strange creatures and that he had ceased to trouble his head about them—of his heart he said nothing and he finished by exclaiming, "On my honor, I doubt if she so much as knows you are here, for she has not looked at you once since your arrival!" And he smiled maliciously, for he knew that the marquis was not accustomed to be neglected by ladies and would take it ill that even a prince should be unconscious of his presence. In this he calculated rightly, for M. de Merosailles was greatly vexed, and, twisting his glass in his fingers, he said:

"If she were not a princess and your sister, sir, I would engage to make her look at me."

"I am not hurt by her looking at you," rejoined the prince, for that evening he was very merry. "A look is no great thing."

And the marquis, being also very merry and knowing that Rudolf had less regard for his dignity than a prince should have, threw out carelessly:

"A kiss is more, sir."

"It is a great deal more," laughed the prince, tugging his mustache.

"Are you ready for a wager, sir?" asked M. de Merosailles, leaning across the table toward him.

"I'll lay you 1,000 crowns to 100 that you do not gain a kiss, using what means you will save force."

"I'll take the wager, sir," cried the marquis, "but it shall be three, not one!"

"Have a care," said the prince. "Don't go too near the flame, my lord! There are some wings in Strelsan lodged at that candle."

"Indeed the light is very bright," assented the marquis courteously. "That risk I must run, though, if I am to win my wager. It is to be three, then, and by what means I will save force?"

"Even so," said Rudolf, and he laughed again, for he thought the wager harmless, since by no means could M. de Merosailles win so much as one kiss from the Princess Osa, and he did not think how he wronged his sister by using her name lightly, being in all such matters a man of careless mind.

But the marquis, having made his wager, set himself steadily to win it, for he brought forth the choicest clothes from his wardrobe and ornaments and perfumes, and he laid fine presents at the princess's feet, and he layd her wherever she went and was profuse of glances, sighs and hints, and he wrote sonnets as fine gentlemen used to do in those days, and lyrics and pastorals, wherein she figured under charming names. These he bribed the princess's waiting women to leave in their mistress's chamber. Moreover, he looked now sorrowful, now passionate, and he ate nothing at dinner, but drank his wine in wild gulps as though he sought to banish sadness.

So that, in a word, there was no device in Cupid's armory that the Marquis de Merosailles did not practice in the endeavor to win a look from the Princess Osa. But no look came and he got nothing from her but cold civility. Yet she had looked at him when he looked not—for princesses are much like other maidens—and thought him a very pretty gentleman and was highly amused by his extravagance, yet she did not believe it to witness any true devotion to her, but thought it mere gallantry.

Then one day M. de Merosailles, having tried all else that he could think of, took to his bed. He sent for a physician and paid him a high fee to find the seeds of a rapid and fatal disease in him, and he made his body servant when his face and darkened the room, and he groaned very pitifully, saying that he was sick and that he was glad of it, for death would be better far than the continued disdain of the Princess Osa. And all this, being told by the marquis's servants to the princess's waiting women, reached Osa's ears and caused her much perturbation, for she now perceived that the passion of the marquis was real and deep, and she became very sorry for him, and the longer the face of the rascally physician grew the more sad the princess became, and she walked up and down, bemoaning the terrible effects of her beauty, wishing that she were not so fair and mourning very tenderly for the sad plight of the unhappy marquis. Through all Prince Rudolf looked on, but was bound by his wager not to undo her. Moreover, he found much entertainment in the

matter and swore that it was worth three times 1,000 crowns.

At last the marquis sent, by the mouth of the physician, a very humble and pitiful message to the princess, in which he spoke of himself as near to death, hinted at the cruel cause of his condition and prayed her of her compassion to visit him in his chamber and speak a word of comfort, or at least let him look on her face, for the brightness of her eyes, he said, might cure even what it had caused.

Deceived by this appeal, Princess Osa agreed to go. Moved by some strange impulse, she put on her loveliest gown, dressed her hair most splendidly and came into his chamber looking like a goddess. There lay the marquis, white as a ghost and languid, on his pillows, and she went to him, and, without a word, she sat down and began to talk very gently and kindly to him, glancing only at the madness which brought him to his sad state, and imploring him to summon his resolution and conquer his sickness for his friends' sake at home in France and for the sake of her brother, who loved him.

"There is nobody who loves me," said the marquis petulantly, and when Osa cried out at this he went on, "For the love of those whom I do not love is nothing to me, and the only soul alive I love"—There he stopped, but his eyes, fixed on Osa's face, ended the sentence for him. And she blushed and looked away. Then, thinking the moment had come, he burst suddenly into a flood of protestations and self-reproach, cursing himself for a fool and a presumptuous man, pitifully craving her pardon and declaring that he did not deserve her kindness, and yet that he could not live without it, and that anything he would be dead soon and thus cease to trouble her. But she, being thus passionately assailed, showed such sweet tenderness and compassion and pity that M. de Merosailles came very near to forgetting that he was playing a comedy and threw himself into his part with eagerness, redoubling his vehemence and feeling now full half of what he said. For the princess was to his eyes far more beautiful in her softer mood. Yet he remembered his wager, and at last, when she was nearly in tears and ready, as it seemed, to do anything to give him comfort, he cried desperately:

"Ah, leave me, leave me! Leave me to die alone. For pity's sake, before you go, and before I die, give me your forgiveness and let your lips touch my forehead in token of it, and then I shall die in peace."

At that the princess blushed still more and her eyes were dim and shone, for she was very deeply touched at his misery and at the sad prospect of the death of so gallant a gentleman for love. Thus she could scarcely speak for emotion, and the marquis, seeing her emotion, was himself much affected, and she rose from her chair and bent over him and whispered comfort to him. Then she leaned down and very lightly touched his forehead with her lips and he felt her eyelashes, that were wet with her tears, brush the skin of his forehead, and then she sobbed and covered her face with her hands. Indeed his state seemed to her most pitiful.

Thus M. de Merosailles had won one of his three kisses, yet, strange to tell, there was no triumph in him, but he now perceived the baseness of his device, and the sweet kindness of the princess, working together with the great beauty of her softened manner, so affected him that he thought no more of his wager and could not endure to carry on his deception, and nothing would serve his turn but to confess to the princess what he had done and humble himself in the dust before her and entreat her to pardon him and let him find forgiveness. Therefore, impelled by these feelings, after he had lain still a few moments listening to the princess's weeping, he leaped suddenly out of the bed, showing himself fully clothed under the bedgown which he now eagerly tore off, and he rubbed all the white he could from his cheeks, and then he fell on his knees before the princess, crying to her that he had played the meanest trick on her and he was a scoundrel and no gentleman and yet that unless she forgave him he should in very truth die. Nay, he would not consent to live unless he could win from her pardon for his deceit. And in all this he was now most absolutely in earnest, wondering only how he had not been as passionately enamored of her from the first as he had feigned himself to be, for a man in love can never conceive himself out of it nor he that is out of it in it, for if he can he is half way to the one or the other, however little he may know it.

At first the princess sat as though she were turned to stone, but when he had finished his confession and she understood the trick that had been played upon her, and how not only her kiss, but also her tears, had been won from her by fraud, and when she thought, as she did, that the marquis was playing another trick upon her and that there was no more truth or honesty in his present protestations than in those which went before, she fell into great shame and into a great rage, and her eyes flashed like the eyes of her father himself as she rose to her feet and looked down on M. de Merosailles as he knelt imploring her. Now her face turned pale from red, and she set her lips and she drew her gown close round her, lest his touch should defile it (so the unhappy gentleman understood the gesture), and she dauntly picked her steps round him lest by chance she should happen to come in contact with so foul a thing. Thus she walked toward the door, and, having reached it, she turned and said to him, "Your death may blot out the insult—nothing less!" And with her head held high and her whole air full of scorn she swept out of the room, leaving the marquis on his knees. Then he

started up to follow her, but dared not, and he flung himself on the bed in a paroxysm of shame and vexation, and now of love, and he cried out loud:

"Then my death shall blot it out, since nothing else will serve!"

For he was in a very desperate mood. For a long while he lay there, and then, having risen, dressed himself in a somber suit of black and buckled his sword by his side and put on his riding boots, and, summoning his servant, bade him saddle his horse. "For," said he to himself, "I will ride into the forest and there kill myself, and perhaps when I am dead the princess will forgive and will believe in my love and grieve a little for me."

Now, as he went from his chamber to cross the moat by the drawbridge he encountered Prince Rudolf returning from hawking. They met full in the center of the bridge, and the prince, seeing M. de Merosailles dressed all in black from the feather in his cap to his boots, called out mockingly: "Who is to be buried today, my lord, and whither do you ride to the funeral? It cannot be yourself, for I see that you are marvelously recovered of your sickness."

"But it is myself," answered the marquis, coming near and speaking low



There lay the marquis.

that the servants and the falcons might not overhear. "And I ride, sir, to my own funeral."

"The jest is still afoot then?" asked the prince. "Yet I do not see your sister at the window to watch you go, and I warrant you have made no way with your wager yet."

"A thousand curses on my wager!" cried the marquis. "Yes, I have made way with the accursed thing, and that is why I now go to my death."

"What has she kissed you?" cried the prince, with a merry, astonished laugh.

"Yes, sir, she has kissed me once, and therefore I go to die."

"I have heard many a better reason than that," answered the prince.

By now the prince had dismounted, and he stood by M. de Merosailles in the middle of the bridge and heard from him how the trick had prospered. At this he was much tickled, and, alas, he was even more diverted when the persistence of the marquis was revealed to him and was most of all moved to merriment when it appeared that the marquis, having gone too near the candle, had been caught by its flame and was so terribly singed and scorched that he could not bear to live. And while they talked on the bridge the princess looked out on them from a lofty, narrow window, but neither of them saw her. Now, when the prince had done laughing, he put his arm through his friend's and bade him not to be a fool, but come in and toast the princess's kiss in a draft of wine. "For," he said, "though you will never get the other two, yet it is a brave exploit to have got one."

But the marquis shook his head, and his air was so morose and so full of scorn that not only was Rudolf alarmed for this reason, but Princess Osa also, at the window, wondered what ailed him and why he wore such a long face, and she now noticed that he was dressed all in black and that his horse waited for him across the bridge.

"Not," said she, "that I care what becomes of the impudent rogue." Yet she did not leave the window, but watched very intently to see what M. de Merosailles would do.

For a long while he talked with Rudolf on the bridge, Rudolf seeming more serious than he was wont to be, and at last the marquis bent to kiss the prince's hand, and the prince raised him and kissed him on either cheek, and then the marquis went and mounted his horse and rode off slowly and unattended into the glades of the forest of Zenda, but the prince, with a shrug of his shoulders and a frown on his brow, entered under the portcullis and disappeared from his sister's view.

Upon this the princess, assuming an air of great carelessness, walked down from the room where she was and faced her brother, sitting still in his boots and drinking wine, and she said:

"M. de Merosailles has taken his leave then?"

"Even so, madam," rejoined Rudolf. Then she broke into a fierce attack on the marquis, and on her brother also, for a man, said she, is known by his friends, and what a man must Rudolf be to have a friend like the Marquis de Merosailles!

"Most brothers," she said in fiery temper, "would make him answer for what he has done with his life, but you laugh. Nay, I dare say you had a hand in it."

As to this last charge the prince had the discretion to say nothing. He chose rather to answer the first part of what she said, and shrugging his shoulders again rejoined, "The fool saves me the trouble, for he has gone off to kill himself."

"To kill himself?" she said, half incredulous, but also half believing, because of the marquis's gloomy looks and black clothes.

"To kill himself," repeated Rudolf. "For in the first place you are angry, and he cannot live, and in the second he has behaved like a rogue, so he cannot live, and in the third place you are so lovely, sister, that he cannot live, and in the first, second and third places he is a fool, so he cannot live." And the prince finished his flagon of wine with every sign of ill humor in his manner.

"He is well dead!" she cried.

"Oh, as you please," said he. "He is not the first brave man who has died on your account." And he rose and strode out of the room very angrily, for he had a great friendship for M. de Merosailles and had no patience with men who let love make dead bones of them.

The Princess Osa, being thus left alone, sat for a little while in deep thought. There rose before her mind the picture of M. de Merosailles riding manfully through the gloom of the forest to his death, and although his conduct had been all and more than all that she had called it, yet it seemed hard that he should die for it. Moreover, if he now in truth felt what he had before feigned the present truth was an atonement for the past treachery, and she said to herself that she could not sleep quietly that night if the marquis killed himself in the forest. Presently she wandered slowly up to her chamber and looked in the mirror and murmured low, "Poor fellow!" And then with sudden speed she attired herself for riding and commanded her horse to be saddled and darted down the stairs and across the bridge and mounted, and, forbidding any one to accompany her, rode away into the forest, following the tracks of the hoofs of M. de Merosailles's horse. It was then late afternoon, and the slanting rays of the sun, striking through the tree trunks, reddened her face as she rode along, spurring her horse and following hard on the track of the forlorn gentleman. But what she intended to do if she came up with him she did not think.

When she had ridden an hour or more, she saw his horse tethered to a trunk, and there was a ring of trees and bushes near, encircling an open grassy spot. Herself dismounting and fastening her horse by the marquis's horse, she stole up and saw M. de Merosailles sitting on the ground, his drawn sword lying beside him, and his back was toward her. She held her breath and waited for a few moments. Then he took up the sword and felt the point and also the edge of it and sighed deeply, and the princess thought that this sorrowful mood became him better than any she had seen him in before.

Then he rose to his feet and took his sword by the blade beneath the hilt and turned the point of it toward his heart. And Osa, fearing that the deed would be done immediately, called out eagerly: "My lord! My lord!" And M. de Merosailles turned round with a great start. When he saw her, he stood in astonishment, his hand still holding the blade of the sword. And, standing just on the other side of the trees, she said:

"Is your offense against me to be cursed by adding an offense against heaven and the church?" And she looked on him with great severity, yet her cheek was flushed, and after awhile she asked in wonder:

"How came you here, madam?" he asked in wonder.

"I heard," she said, "that you meditated this great sin, and I rode after you to forbid it."

"Can you forbid what you cause?" he asked.

"I am not the cause of it," she said, "but your own trickery."

"It is true. I am not worthy to live!" cried the marquis, snatching the hilt of



When he saw her, he stood in astonishment.

his sword to the ground. "I pray you, madam, leave me alone to die, for I cannot tear myself from the world so long as I see your face." And as he spoke he knelt on one knee, as though he were doing homage to her.

The princess caught at a bough of the tree under which she stood and pulled the bough down so that its leaves half hid her face, and the marquis saw little more than her eyes from among the foliage. And thus being better able to speak to him she said softly:

"And dare you die unforgiven?"

"I had prayed for forgiveness before you found me, madam," said he.

"Of heaven, my lord?"

"Of heaven, madam, for of heaven I dare to ask it."

The bough swayed up and down, and now Osa's gleaming hair and now her cheek and always her eyes were seen through the leaves. And presently the marquis heard a voice asking:

"Does heaven forgive me?"

"Indeed, no," said he, wondering.

"And," said she, "are we poor mortals kinder than heaven?"

The marquis rose and took a step or two toward where the bough swayed up and down and then knelt again.

"A great sinner," said he, "cannot believe himself forgiven."

"Then he wrongs the power of whom he seeks forgiveness, for forgiveness is divine."

"Then I will ask it, and if I obtain it I shall die happy."

Again the bough swayed, and Osa said:

"Nay, if you will die you may die unforgiven."

M. de Merosailles, hearing these words, sprang to his feet and came toward the bough until he was so close that he touched the green leaves, and through them the eyes of Osa gleamed, and the sun's rays struck on her eyes, and they danced in the sun, and her cheeks were reddened by the same or some other cause. And the evening was very still and there seemed no sounds in the forest.

"I cannot believe that you forgive; the crime is too great," said he.

(Continued on 7th page.)

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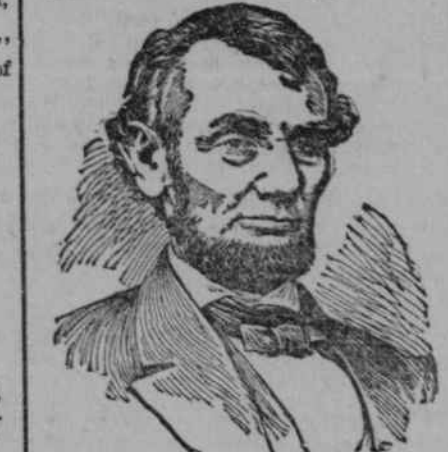
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